

Message Text

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C O N F I D E N T I A L PEKING 0175

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINT CH
SUBJECT: THE PRC EDUCATION DEBATE: "BREAKING WITH OLD IDEAS"

REF: PEKING 0162

1. SUMMARY: DURING THE PAST WEEK, THE PEKING DIPLOMATIC COMMUNITY WAS INVITED TO SPECIAL SHOWINGS OF THE NEW PRC MOVIE "BREAKING WITH OLD IDEAS" TO EXPLAIN THE EDUCATION DEBATE TO FOREIGNERS. RELEASED ONLY THIS MONTH, THE FILM'S THEME IS THE STRUGGLE TO ESTABLISH A COMMUNIST LABOR UNIVERSITY IN KIANGSI IN THE LATE 1975'S AGAINST THE OPPOSITION OF PARTY EDUCATION BUREAUCRATS AND TRADITIONAL EDUCATORS. THE FILM WAS LAVISHLY PRAISED BY CHU LAN--A PSEUDONYMOUS WRITER ON CULTURE OFTEN ASSOCIATED WITH CHIANG CHINA--IN A JANUARY 12 PEOPLE'S DAILY ARTICLE AS A REPUDIATION OF THOSE SEEKING TO REVERSE DECISIONS MADE EARLIER ON THE EDUCATION FRONT AS AN EXAMPLE OF CLOSE INTEGRATION OF THE LITERATURE AND ART SPHERE WITH CURRENT STRUGGLES. IT MAKES A FAIRLY EFFECTIVE CASE FOR STRESSING THE PRACTICAL IN TRAINING RURAL EXTENSION EXPERTS AND REPEATS ALMOST EVERY CLICHE USED IN THE EDUCATION DEBATE. THE FILM DOES NOT HOWEVER, CONFRONT THE CRITICAL ISSUE OF BALANCING RED AND EXPERT IN CHINA'S PREMIER UNIVERSITIES. END SUMMARY.

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2. IN "BREAKING WITH THE OLD," AN ACTIVIST HERO WHO HAS KEPT THE ENTHUSIASM OF HIS YENAN DAYS SETS UP THE LABOR UNIVERSITY IN A REMOTE AREA, TAKES IN WORKER AND PEASANT STUDENTS WHO LACK THE CUSTOMARY ACADEMIC QUALIFICATIONS, REFORMS THE CURRICULUM TO REFLECT THE AGRICULTURE REALITIES OF THE REGION, AND INSTITUTES A WORK-STUDY PROGRAM OF THE KIND NOW ASSOCIATED WITH "OPEN DOOR" TYPE EDUCATION. THE HERO IS SHOWN IN CONSTANT CONFLICT WITH THE EDUCATION BUREAUCRATS AND OLD-STYLE TEACHERS WHO BELIEVE IN TRADITIONAL METHODS AND DENY THE CLASS CONTENT OF EDUCATION. IN ADDITION TO THIS FLAWLESS HERO, THERE ARE THE USUAL HAPPY PEASANTS AND STUDENTS AND GOOD TRIUMPHS OVER EVIL ENDING MANDATORY FOR ALL CHINESE PROPAGANDA FILMS. THE HERO IS SUPPORTED IN HIS ENDEAVORS BY AN ENIGMATIC HIGH-LEVEL CADRE WHO PRESUMABLY IS MEANT TO REPRESENT THOSE PERSONS NOW UPHOLDING THE VALUE OF THE CURRENT SYSTEM. IN THE END, HOWEVER, IT IS NOT THE SUPPORT OF THIS MAN OR OF THE WORKERS AND PEASANTS BUT CHAIRMAN MAO'S ENDORSEMENT OF THE SCHOOL THAT FINALLY ENSURES THE SUCCESS OF THE EXPERIMENT. THE TRADITIONAL TEACHER IN THE FILM IS WON OVER TO THE NEW SYSTEM, BUT THE BUREAUCRATS REMAIN UNRECONSTRUCTED AND PRESUMABLY READY TO RENEW THE BATTLE AT SOME LATER DATE.

3. CHU LAN'S ARTICLE IN PEOPLE'S DAILY PRAISES THE FILM FOR THE LESSONS IT GIVES ON BREAKING DOWN THE TRADITIONAL EDUCATION SYSTEM, DEMONSTRATING THE SUCCESS OF ENROLLING WORKER-PEASANT STUDENTS AND THE "OPEN DOOR" APPROACH TO TEACHING, AND SHOWING THE LENGTHS TO WHICH THE "BOURGEOISIE" WILL GO TO DESTROY THE MAOIST INNOVATIONS. HE ALSO TRIES TO MAKE THE POINT THAT THE FILM REFUTES THE ACCUSATIONS LEVELED AGAINST THE QUALITY OF EDUCATION IN THE PRESENT SYSTEM.

4. IN FACT, HOWEVER, "BREAKING WITH OLD IDEAS" BASICALLY EVADES THE QUESTION OF QUALITY OF THE OVERALL PRC EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM BY FOCUSING NARROWLY ON THE TRAINING OF VETERINARIANS AND PLANT SPECIALISTS. IN ONE SHORT SEGMENT, THE HERO VISITS A LARGE UNIVERSITY AND A STUDENT WHO WISHES TO JOIN AN ELITE RATHER THAN RETURN TO HIS RURAL VILLAGE IS RIDICULED, BUT THE QUALITY OF THE EDUCATION THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS RECEIVE IS NOT ACTUALLY CRITICIZED. MOST OF CHINA'S LEADING EDUCATIONALISTS MIGHT WELL AGREE THAT THE FOCUS OF EDUCATION IN RURAL AREAS SHOULD BE ON AGRICULTURE EXTENSION WORK. THE LABOR UNIVERSITIES AND CHAOYANG

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AGRICULTURAL COLLEGES HAVE CERTAINLY BEEN TOPICS OF SOME CONTROVERSY, BUT WE SUSPECT THAT THE REAL DEBATE IS NOT OVER WHETHER OR NOT THEY HAVE THEIR PLACE IN THE SYSTEM BUT WHETHER THEIR EXPERIENCE IS APPLICABLE TO THE COUNTRY'S TOP EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS. THUS THERE MIGHT BE A TENDENCY OF THE PRC ELITE TO THINK THAT THE SCHOOL SHOWN IN THE MOVIE WAS QUITE ACCEPTABLE FOR THE SONS AND DAUGHTERS OF PEASANTS.

5. OUR OBVIOUSLY ELITE BUREAUCRAT HOSTS (FROM THE FOREIGN
MINISTRY) MAY, HOWEVER, HAVE BEEN SOMEWHAT UNCOMFORTABLE WITH THE
FILM'S REPEATEWNZIGS AGAINST THE BUREAUCRACY. THE BAD GUYS IN
THIS MORALITY PLAY WERE NOT TOTALLY EVIL BUT LONG-TIME
CADRES GONE ASTRAY. THEY ALL WORE THE SYMBOLS OF PRIVILEGE INDWICSHI
NA, THE WELL-TAILORED MAO SUITS WITH FOUNTAIN PENS AND LEATHER
SHOES, AND THE IMPLICATION OF THE FILM WAS THAT IF THE CLIMATE
WAS RIGHT ALL OF OUR HOSTS COULD BE LABELED BOURGEOIS TYPES EDU-
CATED UNDER THE OLD SYSTEM.

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